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Loose Lips and All That

Bert Lance's modest defiance on Capitol Hill the other day deserves a asterisk in the history of these distempered times. Make that two asterisks.

President Carter's former OMB director flatly refused to give a deposition to the Senate subcommittee investigating the Billy business — unless the session was held in public. No more of the behind-closed-door games for him, Mr. Lance said, with considerable restraint, we thought, after his experiences with the Capitol Hill collander. He said he had been battered by "well-planned and well-conceived leaks to the media about testimony or information taken in private" and did not intend to be burned again.

One conventional state of mind will no doubt natter that Mr. Lance protests too much: What's the guy hiding? We think he is on sound ground in this instance: The leak has become institutionalized. Confidentiality translates merely as the time it takes a self-serving party to dig telephone change out of his pocket. Congress may be the worst

offender, but it is not alone in this buzzing town in eagerly converting private information to particular advantage.

The leak and the blind source can be useful from time to time in the political process. But when such devices become a common, indeed routine, currency of power, they erode credibility and that more basic currency of politics, good faith.

There is a time and a proper place for the private conduct of the public business. Secrecy is not by definition perverse. But until the tattered value of confidentiality is, somehow or other, reinforced, Mr. Lance's posture will strike many of us as sensible and even constructive.

In one news report of Mr. Lance's refusal to testify, which appeared in a local pillar of the journalistic community, there was an ironic counterpoint. The article noted that CIA director Stansfield Turner was testifying that same day before the same subcommittee in a closed session. "Sources said Turner was questioned closely . . ." QED.